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A National Security Strategy for South Asia

Course 5604
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JWeber/RStotts/LWohlers
February 28, 1997

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 1997		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1997 to 00-00-1997	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE A National Security Strategy for South Asia				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 13	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

CONTEXT AND NATIONAL INTEREST: The most striking characteristic of South Asian political relationships today is that they appear stranded in a Cold War time warp. To a far greater degree than other major regions, the two principal South Asian powers continue to think and act very much as they did before the Berlin Wall came down. Indeed, in many ways, both India and Pakistan have good reason to regret the end of the Cold War. Certainly East-West tension provided the two nations a handy instrument for manipulating their patrons. They adroitly extracted not only assistance, but -- in the case of Pakistan, in particular -- implicit security assurances as well. For a prestige-conscious Indian elite, meanwhile, the Cold War offered exceptional opportunities to make its mark on the international scene. India's successful combination of democracy and Fabian socialism, its willingness to thumb its nose at American interests, and its robust leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement gave it several decades of international influence far out of proportion to its modest economic and military means.

On the surface, therefore, little has changed in the last fifty years in the basic political and security equation on the sub-continent. Both India and Pakistan continue to regard the other as the major threat to their own security, both continue to spend heavily on military establishments, and each still holds steadfastly to claims in Kashmir completely unacceptable to the other. Although a fourth Indo-Pakistani war is neither imminent nor inevitable, it is striking that the passage of a half century has, far from dissipating bilateral tensions, actually exacerbated them. With the sub-continent on a perpetual war-footing, it is difficult for either country to focus on the fundamental economic problems they both share.

Below this crust of political stagnation, however, lie broader political, economic, and social trends that could -- given a dose of

political will -- push the two nations toward a cetente in the short term and possibly genuine cooperation in the longer term. Elites in both nations are increasingly aware of the extent of their economic difficulties. Although the Green Revolution disguised for decades the enormity of the problem, it is now evident that both nations must dramatically increase their economic growth rate in order to keep pace with rapid population growth. With the benefits of improved agricultural productivity largely absorbed, economic growth can only come from changes in the industrial economy. Despite some differences in their industrial structure, the obstacles to growth in both countries are similar -- insufficient and poorly-targeted investment, apysmal education, insulated and uncompetitive industries, and slow, inefficient and frequently corrupt bureaucracies.

What lends urgency to the call for economic reform on the subcontinent is the steady deterioration in recent years in social cohesion. In India, the increase of Sikh and Hindu militancy have been early signs of social breakdown; in Pakistan, Karachi is a living model of how economic stagnation and ethnic conflict can overwhelm weak governmental institutions and take control of society. Although economic growth alone will clearly not ensure social cohesion, it is just as clearly an essential ingredient.

From a long-term perspective, then, there is remarkable congruence in the two nations' national interests: political rapprochement can spur economic revitalization, which in turn will lay the foundation for social, and by extension domestic political, stability. The challenge for governments is to move beyond the psychic needs of current foreign policy in order to focus on longer term interests. This is no small task. even, for example, if the politicians were to accept that Kashmir's intrinsic value is so small that resolution of the conflict on

any terms is better than none at all, it is not clear how they would explain that to their respective populations.

What is even less clear is how much any of this should matter to the United States. With the Soviet threat a receding memory, American interest -- and interests -- in the region are clearly at their lowest level since the end of World War II. That is not to say, however, that there are none. Though another Indo-Pakistani war would not affect us directly, it would surely lead to further nuclear proliferation and possibly nuclear war -- either of which would be severe setbacks to the NPT regime. Furthermore, war, or just the failure to maintain social order, could also lead to social chaos on a human scale that would dwarf Bosnia and Rwanda combined. The implications for U.S. interests are more than just humanitarian: on a security level, a power vacuum on the sub-continent would inevitably expand Iranian influence in the region.

THREATS AND CHALLENGES. Territorial disputes have preoccupied both nations since independence. For Pakistan, the threat to survival posed by an increasingly dominant India has prompted it to scramble for a nuclear counter-balance. India, for its part has been confronted by two threats: a hostile, though weakened, Pakistan and an unpredictable and militarily superior China. The Chinese defeat of the Indian army in 1962 was a blow to Indian self-confidence. Further, China's successful test of nuclear power in 1964 led to a frenzy of Indian activity to match that capacity--initiating a regional nuclear arms race that continues today.

For India and Pakistan, coping with internal societal problems is the greatest obstacle to security and stability. No single answer produces a key to resolving the myriad of social ills evident in South Asia. In India, population dynamics will create a nation of 1.4 billion people by 2025, while in 1990, half of its population (450 million

people) were classified as "absolutely" poor-- "almost 40% of the whole world's" population (Rowner, 170-171). Similarly, government corruption, trade protectionism, an endemic "welfare" system and an exploitative elite exacerbates conditions of inequality, reduces employment opportunities, and hinders productivity. Pakistan's internal conditions are also debilitating. Not only is Pakistan's population climbing at a rate of 3.1% per year, but their environmental, educational, and governmental inadequacies are at least as severe as India's. For example, Pakistani agricultural production capabilities are likely to be outpaced by population growth. "Serious food shortages could occur in the first decades of the next century. . ." while arable land becomes increasingly exhausted by soil erosion, salinization and other environmental abuses (Asia Society, 13). Notably, in both Pakistan and India, "...feudal practices remain strong [as] governments still tend to underinvest in education, health, and population programs..." (Asia Society, 14).

The most immediate threat to U.S. interests is clearly the potential proliferation of nuclear material and technology, not only to Iran and other hostile nations, but also to dissatisfied and disenfranchised elements within the Indian and Pakistani populations. In this context, the U.S. must also remain aware that our concerns about nuclear proliferation are inextricably linked to progress on the political, economic and social reform agenda.

SCENARIOS. While the security and stability of South Asia are substantially driven by the relations, successes and failures of the region's dominant nations--India and Pakistan--other countries within South Asia will also have either stabilizing or destabilizing effects. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has the potential to be a stabilizing factor within the region. Not only does

it provide a forum for substantive dialogue on issues of common concern, it also presents a structure to build regional trust and cooperation. However, even with a fully functional SAARC, a virtually infinite number of alternative futures face the region. In a best case scenario, both India and Pakistan could find the right combination of insight, flexibility, and resolve to correct the structural deficiencies currently corrupting their versions of democracy. Reducing governmental turpitude, eradicating structures which promote inequality, and enhancing education opportunities would be excellent first steps toward achieving viable social systems.

A second scenario is more likely--the continuation of the status quo, or sometimes described as "muddling through." Both India and Pakistan have enormous political, economic, social and religious challenges to their stability. However, both governments have demonstrated an amazing degree of resiliency. As Dennis Austin, emeritus professor of government at the University of Manchester has written, "[t]he immensity of Indian society swallows up the good and the bad, the right and the wrong. Like the Ganges, it carries everything with it. The terrible events of 1984 [storming of the Sikh golden temple in Amritsar, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi] and the later years have had their effect, but along with the natural disasters of earthquakes and floods, they will become part of their time, not forgotten, but absorbed" (Austin, 49-50). For Pakistan, the strongly religious dimension of their government and society provides a basis for their cohesiveness and endurance. Despite the self-inflicted pressures of ineffective economic policies, or the perceived external threats to state sovereignty, the "fundamentalist" aspects of Islam "...means authenticity and rootedness, which gives it strength and resilience" (Rupesinghe, 55).

In fact, a less-likely -- yet more-ominous -- possibility also looms -- social disintegration that produces civil and regional war leading to nuclear catastrophe. Terrorism in both its state-sponsored and external forms continues to haunt Kashmir, as well as other subregional areas. Furthermore, rising political expectations from the lower classes, combined with unchecked government corruption, could produce a convergence of negative pressures which would undermine power elites in Pakistan and India. To the extent that either government feels threatened, explosive rhetoric blaming internal conditions on external actors could lead to conventional military action over Kashmir, possibly escalating to nuclear devastation.

These scenarios consider a wide variety of potential outcomes. It will be the willingness of regional actors to participate responsibly in bilateral and multilateral forums and the depth of their desires to resolve the fundamental problems of the region which will be the truly critical factors determining which scenario wins out.

POLICY OBJECTIVES: While it is true that internal problems are the greatest long-term threats to India and Pakistan, this is ironically the area in which the U S will have the least influence. It is thus more effective for us to focus on reducing regional security threats in order to allow those governments the breathing space and resources to deal with their own domestic issues. Any list of U S. policy objectives in South Asia must thus be headed by the reduction, if not elimination, of the risk of a nuclear conflict between Pakistan and India. The leaders of the two nations have exercised a heartening level of restraint in recent years and are fully cognizant of the fact that neither side could truly win in a nuclear scenario. The Kashmir flashpoint, combined with volatile internal political climates on both sides, means that the possibility of such a conflict cannot be ignored,

however. While the U.S. has no preferred resolution to the Kashmir question, a political settlement reflecting the will of the majority is both consistent with often-stated U.S. values and the option most likely to pave the way for long-term stability

Also important to our long term regional interests is the successful evolution of economic, political and social structures fostering the full participation of all levels of society in a modern economy integrated into world markets and unfettered by inefficiencies and other distortions arising from central control. The U.S. role in assisting India to achieve this goal is especially important, as our engagement, if it is viewed as constructive, will set the stage for U.S. prominence in an economy estimated by some to be the world's second largest by 2025. Cooperation with the region on countering international crime, narcotics and terrorism is also high on our agenda, and, to a large degree, dependent on the presence of stable regimes sensitive to human rights concerns.

To effectively pursue our goals, we must find ways to make them dovetail with the goals of the region's key players -- security for both India and Pakistan, India's desire for recognition as the dominant regional power (both in its bilateral relations and in multilateral fora), and Pakistan's desire for a continuing special relationship with the U.S. -- one in which Pakistan is viewed as a real partner, rather than a convenient pawn in the battle with the USSR. Key to the success of U.S. diplomatic efforts will be our ability to overcome traditional Indian mistrust of American intentions in the region and to establish a constructive dialogue on issues of mutual concern.

In making policy choices, the U.S. should bear in mind that its interests in South Asia, while important, are not vital. The recognition of this fact simultaneously constrains our choices -- by

logically limiting the resources we are prepared to expend -- and expands them by opening the way for the constructive engagement of partners we might not trust with issues more central to our own security. Both Russia and China are key players in South Asian security and psychology, and both arguably have more to lose from regional instability or nuclear conflict than we do. As we seek to "engage" China and demonstrate to Russia that we respect the legitimate role it is destined to play in world events, the India-Pakistan conflict seems a reasonable test of both their intentions and ours.

India has repeatedly defended its nuclear program by citing the threat from China, while Pakistan has asserted its unwillingness to back away from its own program without similar moves from India. It has been reported that Chinese representatives have privately indicated a willingness to discuss redeploying missiles threatening India. Reduced border tensions and the recent agreement by the Chinese to replenish the nuclear fuel needed for the Tarapur power reactors are other indications that old hostilities are softening. Perhaps now is the moment for China to emerge as a stabilizing force in the region and take the first step toward reducing tensions by redeploying those missiles. Moscow's participation/cosponsorship of negotiations toward this goal would reassert its prominence and perhaps serve to reassure its former protege. A careful analysis of China's and Russia's own regional agenda, and an assessment of the net effect of their inclusion, should precede a full-court press to enlist their assistance.

As we consider enlisting Beijing and Moscow in the nonproliferation effort, we may also wish to test the waters for a role for a far more reliable ally -- the United Kingdom -- in the Kashmir dispute. Despite the bitterness of the colonial legacy, regional ties to Britain have remained strong, and London may be accepted as an honest broker in unraveling the Gordian knot it created at the time of

Independence Security Council permanent members should gently but consistently remind India that it is unlikely to secure its coveted place on the Council while it fails to implement UNSC resolutions and its own pledge to implement a plebiscite in Kashmir. In our bilateral relations with New Delhi, we should recognize India's inevitable preeminence in the region in symbolic ways - military fleet exercises, high level visits not automatically coupled with reciprocal visits to Islamabad - while linking more substantive cooperation with movement toward a resolution in Kashmir.

Some degree of progress on Kashmir will be a necessary foundation for building the mutual confidence that could in time lead to denuclearization. Such confidence would not grow overnight, but would rather be the result of a variety of incremental steps toward cooperation on both security and transnational issues. American assistance and training resources could be used to encourage India and Pakistan to undertake joint efforts in politically neutral endeavors such as peacekeeping, disaster assistance and humanitarian relief. Over time, the visible evidence of common interests will erode antagonisms, reduce tensions and pave the way for reduced reliance on military solutions. Renewed U.S. military assistance to Pakistan is a crucial element in this process. Finding the least painful way to waive the Pressler Amendment with respect to Pakistan will indeed be difficult, and we will have to work hard to prevent such a move from undercutting our commitment to nonproliferation around the world. It is nevertheless an option worth exploring. U.S. intelligence assets could play an integral part in this strategy. A U.S. commitment (or threat, depending on one's point of view) to monitor the region and report to either party any indications of impending military threat by the other could bolster security and pave the way for some bilateral confidence building measures.

Domestic instability remains a major threat to both Pakistan and India. The U.S. should support a strengthened SAARC, which might be able to convince both countries to work toward common solutions to shared economic and social problems. Only constant pressure from major powers and neighbors in the region will convince India and Pakistan to go beyond their psychic needs for prestige and high-priced security to attend to their fundamental needs of providing for populations in urgent need of education, health care and economic opportunity. The U.S. can assist by resuming targeted assistance to Pakistan (again, assuming the Presser waiver) and sponsoring low-key academic and other exchanges that throw together up-and-coming leaders from India and Pakistan. Although the U.S. cannot guarantee that American business will flock to the region, it can continue to encourage and assist both countries in implementing policies leading to the stability and transparency attractive to the private sector.

CONCLUSION. All three countries in this study have been slow in adjusting their policies to post-Cold War realities. Although neither Indian and Pakistani elites are unaware of the fact that change is called for, they appear to be moving in fits and starts rather than taking the forceful, rapid steps that the seriousness of their problems would suggest. America, despite its de facto disengagement from the region, can still play a positive role by nudging these old antagonists toward greater cooperation. Ironically, America's very disinterest in the region may make it easier for to put aside its visceral fear of American meddling in "its" sphere of influence. Thus, the challenge for the U.S. will be to find sufficient political will to stay engaged in South Asia, precisely to help the region avoid the kind of doomsday scenario that would surely attract our attention.

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